

VZCZCXRO4836

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DE RUEHBW #0031/01 0121526

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

R 121526Z JAN 09

FM AMEMBASSY BELGRADE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0858
INFO RUEHZN/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 000031

DEPT FOR EUR/SCE (P. PETERSON)

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL SR

SUBJECT: SERBIAN FOREIGN MINISTER STRIKES CONCILIATORY NOTE, BUT REPEATS SAME MESSAGE

REF: BELGRADE 21

Summary

¶1. (SBU) In an address to Serbian ambassadors gathered in Belgrade, Foreign Minister Jeremic called for cooperation based on international law during a time of shifting balances of power. He identified Kosovo, European integration, and the Western Balkans as Serbia's top foreign policy priorities, while referring only briefly to Russia and expressing hope for renewed relations with the United States. Jeremic's comments struck us as conciliatory, likely prompted by the public criticism he has experienced in recent weeks and his desire to get off on the right foot with the incoming U.S. administration. End Summary.

¶2. (U) During the annual meeting of Serbian ambassadors in Belgrade, Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic on January 11 gave an overview of foreign policy priorities for 2009. First sharing his global vision, Jeremic called for countries to cooperate on the basis of international law. He described the world as in flux, claiming that there was "geopolitical change" and "the balance of power is shifting" and cautioning against the temptation to retreat into isolation. He claimed Serbia's foreign policy in 2008 had been a great success in the face of difficult challenges -- two tight elections, Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence -- culminating in the ICJ triumph at the UNGA. He took credit for a "shift in favor of peace in the Balkans" and Serbia's European choice.

Kosovo, Europe, Balkans

¶3. (U) Jeremic said that there would be three core priorities for Serbian foreign policy in 2009: Kosovo, Europe, and the Balkans. The fight for Kosovo would take place in the legal arena, as Serbia sought to defend its territorial integrity through the International Court of Justice (ICJ). He argued that no one should pre-judge the ICJ decision by recognizing Kosovo; that no one should encourage others to recognize; and that Kosovo should not be admitted to international institutions pending the ICJ judgment.

¶4. (U) Jeremic underscored the need to accelerate engagement with the European Union, identifying three elements: pursuing visa liberalization, continuing full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) while trying to get the Dutch to change their stance, and urging the EU to accept Serbia's membership application. Calling Serbia "the indispensable democratic leader of the Balkans," Jeremic said that 2009 would be the year of European integration for Serbia.

15. (SBU) The Foreign Minister named western Balkan relations as the third priority. "We need to work in concert" to achieve common goals, Jeremic said. (He implied, but did not explicitly say, that part of this effort would be aimed at isolating Kosovo in the region.) The fact that some neighbors had recognized Kosovo was "unfortunate" but relationships had not suffered because of it, Jeremic said. He noted Croatia's ICJ lawsuit, claiming that the Serbs had sought reconciliation but the Croats had not, but said that any disagreements would now take place in the legal field since both countries had to work together.

The Rest of the World

16. (U) Perhaps in light of the gas cut-off which generated significant public anger toward Russia (reftel), Jeremic limited his comments on relations with Russia to simply thanking Russia for its support and calling for close ties. In contrast, Jeremic spoke in some detail about relations with the United States, noting that the ties go back 125 years and that for most of that time the two countries had defended common values. Jeremic said that the events of the 1990s and Kosovo's UDI were significant setbacks, but "January 20 gives us a new chance" to move forward in the context of different views but common goals. He quoted U.S. President Lincoln's call to "think anew, act anew."

17. (U) Jeremic expressed hope that Serbia could deepen its ties with China and India. Harkening back to the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961, in which Yugoslavia played a leading role, the Foreign Minister highlighted the importance of attaining international dignity and influence through such collective action, without providing specific details.

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18. (SBU) After the speech, both Jeremic and his political director Borislav Stefanovic told the Ambassador that Jeremic was deliberately reaching out to us; "I only mentioned two presidents, Tadic and Lincoln," Jeremic said.

Comment

19. (SBU) Jeremic was clearly trying to be conciliatory and statesmanlike. His delivery was slow and calm, not his usual passionate oratory, seeking to express gravity and purpose. He appears to have been somewhat chastened by recent events. (Jeremic is rumored to have encouraged former CHOD Ponos to challenge MOD Sutanovac, which backfired; he had a less-than-successful trip to Bosnia; and he has been the target of numerous scathing press stories about the damage he has done to Serbia's reputation among European leaders.) Although he made the usual self-serving comments about Kosovo, the neighbors, and Europe, he was not combative. While we can expect him to weigh his commentary more carefully in the near term, and to minimize his rhetoric about Russia being Serbia's main partner, he will undoubtedly continue to be difficult to deal with on issues such as Kosovo. He was conciliatory in tone, but the underlying problems of Serbian foreign policy remain. End Comment.

MUNTER